

Chicago Tribune, June 25, 2007

WASHINGTON -- Executives from the oil company BP hit a bipartisan buzz saw on Capitol Hill on Tuesday, as Illinois lawmakers rebuked them in a private meeting and the House prepared to condemn BP's plans for increasing the dumping of pollutants into Lake Michigan.

Bashing BP, which recently secured an Indiana state permit to discharge more ammonia and suspended solids from its massive oil refinery in Whiting, is a new sport for Illinois politicians who see big problems with the permit -- and little political downside to attacking an oil giant over drinking-water quality, especially with no Illinois jobs hanging in the balance.

The House appears set to approve a resolution Wednesday, sponsored in part by Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.), that condemns the dumping permit. It allows BP to release 54 percent more ammonia and 35 percent more solids, tiny particles of pollutants that make up sludge, than it already dumps daily into Lake Michigan.

BP said Tuesday it has done everything possible to keep more pollution out of the lake. And BP executives -- including the company's American president, Bob Malone -- pledged to re-evaluate their Indiana expansion plans by Sept. 1 with environmental quality in mind during a noontime meeting in the office of Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), the politicians in attendance said and a BP spokesman confirmed.

Emanuel called the meeting "a clear, frank, unambiguous conversation" between BP and a bipartisan coalition opposed to increased Lake Michigan dumping. Durbin called the meeting a "wake-up call" for BP. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), one of a half-dozen Great Lakes lawmakers at the meeting, said Malone ended the meeting by indicating that "he gets it now."

There were no Indiana lawmakers at the meeting. They generally have been reluctant to criticize BP, at least in part because the refinery expansion would add 80 jobs.

Republicans and Democrats from Illinois warned throughout the day that BP would lose any fight over Great Lakes pollution and that the company was risking an environmentally friendly image it promotes heavily in advertising campaigns.

"I told Mr. Malone that BP will not win this battle," said Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.). "For my purposes, this bipartisan meeting was to discuss the terms of surrender for BP."

The company wants to overhaul its 118-year-old refinery, the nation's fourth-largest, to process heavier Canadian crude oil. Dug out of tar-like sands in northern Alberta, the oil is considered a more reliable source than supplies in the Middle East. But extracting petroleum from the thick goop is a dirtier process than conventional methods.

When the company sought a new water permit for the Whiting refinery, state and federal regulators agreed there isn't enough room at the 1,400-acre site to upgrade the water treatment plant enough to keep more pollution out of Lake Michigan, the source of drinking water for Chicago and scores of other communities.

As a result, BP now will be allowed to dump an average of 1,584 pounds of ammonia and 4,925 pounds of suspended solids into the lake daily.

The additional solids, tiny sludge particles that escape water treatment filters, are the maximum allowed under federal guidelines.

Ammonia promotes algae blooms that can kill fish, while suspended solids contain heavy metals such as lead, nickel and vanadium.

In advertisements and e-mails published during the past two weeks, BP has insisted the treated water it pumps into the lake is largely free of toxic waste. Federal records, though, show the refinery already is one of the largest sources of industrial pollution pumped directly into Lake Michigan.

BP officials said they plan to spend \$150 million to upgrade the refinery's water treatment plant. They note that federal and state regulators concluded the additional pollution would not harm the environment.

"We're always looking for ways to minimize the environmental impact of our actions," said Scott Dean, a BP spokesman.

Schakowsky said the controversy had rendered BP's pro-environment ad spending "wasted." Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill.) said the company was acting as if its initials stood for "Back to Pollution."

Illinois lawmakers have complained about the Indiana permit in several press releases and letters to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich joined the list of angry politicians Tuesday with a statement threatening to sue Indiana in federal court if the permit isn't reworked.

Several Illinois lawmakers said Tuesday that protecting the Great Lakes, the world's largest source of fresh surface water, is more important than the potential for cheaper gasoline.

Durbin said increasing refinery capacity, and perhaps lowering gas prices in the process, would be "unacceptable" if it came "at the expense of the water that we drink."

"It's your money or your life," Durbin said. Politically speaking, the controversy is a chance for Illinois lawmakers to show off a cooperative spirit and for a congressman such as Kirk -- whose swing suburban district north of Chicago produced a tough race last year -- to tout his environmental credentials.

The politics are less clear-cut in Indiana, as reflected by the position of Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.) on the issue.

"We can't compromise Lake Michigan or any part of our environment for economic progress," said Jonathan Swain, Bayh's press secretary. But, he added, the refinery "is vital to issues relating to the nation's energy supply and our economy."